

## *Strength of Concentration*

*April 13, 2020*

Ajaan Fuang once noted that you hear everyone saying how much the practice is a matter of simply letting go, letting go, but that's not the case. There's also developing. When he said this to me, I was brand new to the practice. I didn't know much about what other people were saying about it. But the more I see, the more I practice myself, the more I realize how important his teaching is. Before you let go, you have to have something good to hold on to. And that something good to hold on to is something you have to create.

So even though when concentration is defined as a strength, it's said to be that you bring the mind to singleness of mind with the purpose of letting go, the question is: How do you first bring the mind to singleness? The Buddha's definition is warning us that the purpose of concentration is not to build up powers. They do happen to some people; they don't happen to others. But if you make your purpose building up certain powers, then, as you get the mind concentrated, if the mind is not already well-settled, well-established—in other words, it hasn't cleared out its home, cleared out the closets—gaining extra powers can be dangerous. We have to keep reminding ourselves: We're doing this to let go. We're trying to create a place in the mind where we can let go of unskillful things. But first we have to work to create that space.

The work here is directed thought and evaluation: how we talk to ourselves. And what do we talk to ourselves about? The formula says that we should put aside all thoughts of sensuality, all concerns about the sensual pleasures today, sensual pleasures tomorrow, and we're going to focus on three things. The themes of right concentration are the frames of reference in establishing mindfulness, and the three big frames you're going to be focused on right away will be body, feelings, and mind.

The body, of course, is how you experience it right now, and how you experience it is going to come through the breath. So what you're evaluating is: "Is this a good breath to settle down with? If I keep on breathing in this way, is it going to be a good place to be?" If you're not sure, you can experiment: long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, whole-body breathing.

Whole-body breathing is important. That's where you're headed. So it's good to think of the breath energies flowing throughout the body. You actually do nourish the body in this way. I have a student who has had compromised lung function since she was young. She now has to wear an oxygen monitor all the time. A while ago she began to notice that when she was meditating and she looked down at the monitor, if she was doing whole-body breathing, the

oxygen level went up. And when the body is well-nourished like this, then the breath can be more still, more calm, and the body won't be starved.

So that's something you want to work toward: breathing with the whole body, asking yourself, "Where in the body is the breath not going? Where are there patterns of tension? Where are you squeezing the blood, squeezing the breath, unconsciously? And what can you do to change that?"

The second theme you focus on are feelings. We're trying to create a sense of ease and well-being, fullness with the breath. So what kind of breathing does feel good? What kind of breathing will give a sense of fullness? Focus where the breath feels most prominent. Try to choose a spot in the body that's sensitive to the breath energy and ask yourself what kind of breathing with satisfy that spot. Allow it to develop a sense of fullness. Don't squeeze it out with the out-breath. Then, when it's full, can you think of that fullness seeping out through the rest of the body?

Then finally, there's mind. Is your mind ready to settle down? Sometimes the directed thought and evaluation have to drop the breath for the time being to deal with issues in the mind, especially if you're carrying something in from the day that, for some reason, you can't let go. Stop for a moment and think about it and how you really don't need to think about it. You don't need to carry it around. What you do need is time to put it aside and rest, gain some strength. Use whatever way you have of thinking about it that helps you let it go.

If it's an issue of lust, ask yourself, "What would I gain by satisfying my lustful fantasies? What would I lose? And what is there that I'm lusting after anyhow?" This is why the analysis of the body into its various parts is a very useful meditation to have at hand, to show you that there's not much worthy of lust in any body. At the very least, this realization helps take your attention away from the object of the lust and turns around to the lust itself. Because you'll find many times that the allure of lust is not so much in the object. It's in the narratives you build around it. So if you can analyze the object until you can put it aside, then you can focus on the narratives and see how they really aren't worth it. They're really dumb. When you can see that, then it's easier to put them aside. And then you get back to the breath.

The same goes for any anger that you're carrying around. Is it worth carrying around? "Well, so-and-so did this, and it really was bad." Well, does it really matter? And do you need to carry that around right now? You can have an image in your mind of all the things the mind carries around as being like a big burden you've placed on your shoulders, and how huge that burden can be. Now, if you saw somebody carrying a load like that around, you'd feel really sorry for them: "Why do you carry it around? There's nobody forcing you. You can put it down."

Part of the mind may complain about putting it down, but look carefully into the part of the mind that's complaining about putting it down, that says, "It's not right. I want to get back at that person. Justice won't be done." Justice is rarely done in the world. Once one person's idea of justice has been carried out, other people don't like it and will come back with their idea of justice. The world has this back and forth, back and forth: Who knows how long it's been going on? When you can think in this way, then it's easier to put it down.

When the mind that's been concentrated in one spot on one feeling can begin to melt, loosen up its hardness, melt into the body, melt into that sense of ease, then you can have all three things together: body, i.e., the breath; feelings; and mind, all occupying the same space, spread out through the body. And once you have that, then you maintain it.

This is where you have to talk to yourself in a new way. Thoughts will come up: "Well, here's a good chance to think about  $x$ . Here's a good chance to think about  $y$ . You've cleared the decks." No. You want this to be a spot where nothing else matters right now. Just maintain this state of mind with whatever ways you have of talking to yourself to maintain it, reminding yourself that the mind needs rest like this, needs to spread out through the body like this. The body needs the attention of the mind. The two of them help each other along as they're cemented together through that feeling of ease.

Keep talking to yourself like this until you don't need to talk to yourself anymore. The message has gotten through. At the moment, nothing else matters. There's just this, along with a great sense of ease that comes when you can put that chatter—even the chatter that leads to concentration—aside. Just be right here. If any of the thoughts come nibbling away at the mind, you just say No. This is something you want to maintain. This is something you develop. You hold on to this. This is what you do gain from the meditation. But the purpose of gaining this is so that you can let everything else go.

So try to create this spot in the mind where nothing else matters. It can be your refuge, it's your strength. It's the nourishment the mind needs so that it can let go of all the various ways in which it drives itself crazy. Whatever anxieties there may be about the future, whatever sense of frustration there may be about the present, really eat away at the mind unless you have an inner sense of nourishment. But with this sense of nourishment, you can let go of a lot of things. You can put those burdens down.

So this is what you develop for the sake of letting go. And the stronger the sense that nothing else matters right now, the more nourishment you'll be able to find, so that when you have to go out and deal with the world and take on the various duties that go with "this matters" and "that matters," you still have one foot in this other space, so that when other things do matter, you have the strength to deal with them properly. But you also learn the skill of learning how

to put them down. Let them go—so that even though there are burdens you sometimes have to carry in the world, you don't have to be bent over all the time.